

“Wouldn’t She Notice He Had Mud on His Shirt?”: Scaffolding Meaningful Discussions

When you walk into my sixth-grade classroom, the first thing you notice is that most of the students are talking. On any given day, students will be found grouped around the room in threes or fours, sitting with heads close together, engaged in various academic conversations. Some may be clustered at a table sharing reactions to an article they have just read, or sitting cross-legged in a circle on the blue classroom rug with pages of notes scattered around them, participating in a focused discussion about whether Alexander the Great was indeed really so “great.”

Rich conversations similar to these have occurred frequently in my sixth-grade English language arts and social studies classroom, ever since I began using simple colored pieces of paper that I call “talk tickets” to help build my middle level students’ discussion skills throughout the school year. Although I am not the first teacher to provide students with tokens of some kind in order to clearly mark whose turn it is to talk during a discussion, I have expanded the use of discussion markers in a way that allows students to focus on one concrete skill at a time. The end result of this gradual process is the rich, student-led conversations like those described above—discussions in which all group members are invited to participate, students remain focused, and high-level thinking skills blossom for all learners.

Research on Talk and Learning

There is a relationship between the structural supports teachers set in place to foster academic discourse in their classrooms and the quality of learning that is realized by their students. Research suggests that students who are given frequent and equitable opportunities for academic talk will be more likely to make academic gains (Barnes & Todd, 1995; Mercer, 1995). Barnes and Todd (1995) explain:

For most students, talk is the most important way of working on understanding. Talk is flexible: in talk they can try out new ways of thinking and reshape an idea in mid-sentence, respond immediately to the hints and doubts of others, and collaborate in shaping meanings they could not hope to reach alone. (p. 15)

In the following discussion of Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1991), for example, four students go beyond the original discussion prompt (a question about the name of the white children’s school) to “shape meanings” about the events and characters in the novel.

DAVID: Do you think it’s a good idea for that, like, really tall guy to stay with the Logans?

CAITLIN: What tall guy?

DAVID: That tall guy that came with Papa.

RYAN: Oh yeah! Find out his name . . . look it up . . .

DAVID: Mr. Morrison.

ANGELA: Yeah, that guy . . .

DAVID: Yeah, I think it is fair, because like . . .

ANGELA: Is he white?

DAVID: No, he's black.

DAVID: I think it's fair because he lost his job, and the Logans are willing to let him stay there.

CAITLIN: Yeah, they're nice . . .

RYAN: Oh yeah, remember on p. 37, when, um, Mrs. Logan, she asked Mr. Morrison, why, like, um, he lost his job?

ANGELA: Yeah.

RYAN: And then he said 'cause he got in a fight . . .

ANGELA: with the whites.

DAVID: Yeah, with the whites.

RYAN: Except that the whites started the fight . . .

DAVID: It was the whites' fault . . .

RYAN: and they didn't get in trouble, but he did, and he got, he got fired . . . so, that's not fair.

ANGELA: I know.

DAVID: It's all because they're racist . . .

ANGELA: and I wrote [in reading journal], I'm surprised, like, with all the things they said about kids getting lynched and stuff, um, why Mr. Morrison wouldn't get, like, even hurt . . .

Documented student conversations such as this one are examples of the concept suggested by Allison Zmuda in her article, "Springing into Active Learning" (2008), in which she speaks of the difference between students who are simply "compliant" and those who are genuinely "engaged." As one example of this difference, Zmuda writes, "In classroom discussions, compliant learners typically restrict themselves to answering the question the teacher asked, whereas engaged learners tend to raise additional questions, delve more deeply into thinking, or offer another point of view" (p. 38).

In the excerpt about Mr. Morrison above, we see these sixth graders "delving more deeply into

thinking" and using strong discussion skills in several ways. First, David questions the decision Papa makes about having a near-stranger move in with the family, a decision outside David's own personal experience and probably difficult for him to understand in today's world. Ryan demonstrates his skill in using the text for support several times during the conversation, and he also expands the discussion David began by reminding the group of a question Mrs. Logan asked of Mr. Morrison about why he lost his job. Angela feels comfortable asking a clarifying question, "Is he white?" and by the end of this excerpt, these students have deepened their personal understandings about Mr. Morrison's role in the story—a process of deep thinking that "compliant" learners would not have accomplished.

Karen Evans's (2002) research of students' experiences in literature groups echoes Zmuda's words: "We need to invite students to pose and discuss their own questions because teachers' questions and interpretations of texts may have little connection to students' perspectives" (p. 46). Indeed, it never would have occurred to me to pose the question that Angela poses in the following conversation about *Roll of Thunder* that took place on another day. In this excerpt, the group had once again finished talking about the prompt they had been given. Yet, discussion had become such a fundamental part of their class time over the course of the year that it did not occur to these middle level students to stop talking about the book. Instead, they posed their own questions generated from their perspectives as students and began trying to figure out how the Logan children could have left school for an hour without anyone noticing, a scenario well outside of their own experiences with today's security-conscious school campuses.

Discussion had become such a fundamental part of their class time over the course of the year that it did not occur to these middle level students to stop talking about the book.

ANGELA: Yeah, and it's kinda weird, though, like, wouldn't the teachers notice that they slipped out of school?

RYAN, DAVID, CAITLIN: [simultaneous]
Yeah! I know . . .

ANGELA: 'Cause then it says on page 52 it also says . . . uh . . . uh . . . "as I slipped into

my seat, Miss Crocker looked at me oddly and shook her head." Like, wouldn't she notice he wasn't there before?

DAVID: Yeah, and wouldn't she notice he had mud on his shirt?

RYAN: Well, they went out at lunch time, didn't they?

SIDE TRIP: HOLDING DIGITAL DISCUSSIONS

Students educated in a digital age must master how to hold meaningful discussions, both face-to-face and online. As more teachers use discussion boards hosted by their district's e-platform service, students and teachers are learning that the skills for traditional conversations cannot simply be bolted onto a virtual environment. The explosion of more affordable technologies is making it possible for districts to offer middle schools a digital dimension to classroom learning. One media forecast company surveyed administrators in February 2010 about future projects and found that more than half of the K-12 public school districts surveyed would offer online learning courses in the 2011-12 school year (Simba Information, 2010).

One of the most popular aspects of online learning is the discussion board. These are typically asynchronous and begin with a teacher-constructed prompt to get the conversation going. Many teachers require their students to post a required number of original threads in order to provide group members with material to respond to. It is useful to teach students about types of prompts so they can ask rich questions of one another. Larson (2009) advises also teaching students *how* to ask them. I'll use *Rules* (Lord, 2008) to illustrate these:

- *Experiential prompts* draw on the background of the reader. For example, "Have you experienced a time when you felt incredibly isolated, like Catherine is feeling when she lies to Jason?"
- *Aesthetic prompts* invite the reader to discuss his or her emotional responses. "I was feeling embarrassed when her younger brother, David, was dancing. How did this scene make you feel?"
- *Cognitive prompts* focus on the elements of reading comprehension, such as making a prediction or an inference. For instance, "What do you think is going to happen next, and why?"
- *Interpretive prompts* require the reader to fuse what is occurring in the story with their own experiences and values. "I'd like to think I wouldn't give in to peer pressure, but Catherine's decision to lie about going to Jason's birthday party has me thinking. What would you do in the same situation?"
- *Clarification prompts* keep the conversation going when it gets confusing or unclear, such as, "Tell me more about that, because I don't understand."

These prompts can be taught and utilized in face-to-face interactions using the talk tickets instructional routine Chiaravalloti describes in the article. Whether virtually or across a classroom table, teaching students to ask questions of one another can enrich any discussion.

Larson, L. C. (2009). Reader response meets new literacies: Empowering readers in online communities. *The Reading Teacher*, 62, 638-648.

Lord, C. (2008). *Rules*. Scholastic: New York.

Simba Information. (2010). *Moving online: K-12 distance learning market forecast 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.simbainformation.com>.

—Nancy Frey

DAVID: Yeah, but still, not a lot of people would have mud on their shirts when they come back in from lunch.

CAITLIN: It's not like they ate mud for lunch . . .

RYAN, ANGELA: (laugh) yeah . . .

ANGELA: And, um . . . and it said he slipped back into his seat. So maybe he, like, sneaked back in, but wouldn't she know that he wasn't there before?

DAVID: Yeah, 'cause if you, like, slip back into your seat, you're missing like, a minute of class and stuff . . .

ANGELA: Yeah, and he was there, he was in the class before . . .

DAVID: Yeah, I don't get it. . . .

RYAN: And, like, aren't there, like, teachers watching them at lunch?

ANGELA, DAVID: I know!

RYAN: No one noticed that these kids ran outside, grabbed tools, and started digging a ditch?

DAVID: Maybe it's like, a poor school so they couldn't really afford the people to be watching them?

ANGELA: Yeah, like they had different classes . . .

RYAN: Maybe they ate outside . . .

DAVID: Well, that's a possibility . . .

ANGELA: then they could easily slip away . . . kinda.

DAVID: Like, then you could easily get mud on your shirt if you, like, take a step on the grass and slip.

RYAN: I don't think they could afford a cafeteria . . .

DAVID: yeah, so they . . . ate lunch . . .

CAITLIN: so they ate outside . . . on the ground . . .

ANGELA: and that would be more reasonable.

DAVID: Yeah, so maybe that's why she only shook her head.

ANGELA: yeah . . . okay . . .

This example displays a high level of student engagement, and it demonstrates the way students can, as Barnes and Todd described, "reshape an idea in mid-sentence" and build on each other's ideas to gradually develop a collaborative resolution to their original question. In this excerpt, students also used evidence from the text to support ideas, brought in their own personal experiences, and generated a smooth conversation in which everyone was allowed to participate.

Neil Mercer (1995), a researcher who has spent two decades studying the "process of teaching and learning through talk" (p. vii), explains that "language is a social mode of thinking" and that "school can offer pupils the chance to involve people in their thoughts—to use conversations to develop their own thoughts" (p. 4). After his review of the research and his own studies of talk sequences recorded in classrooms, Mercer (1995) writes, "My review leads me to the conclusion that talk between learners has been shown to be valuable for the construction of knowledge. Joint activity provides opportunities for practicing and developing ways of *reasoning with language*, and the same kinds of opportunities do not arise in teacher-led discourse" [italics original] (p. 98).

In the dialogue excerpt above, for instance, the four students displayed "reasoning with language" when they persevered along a line of questioning until they came up with an answer that satisfied them. This level of deep thinking would be unlikely to occur for most students during teacher-led discussions. In the student-led discussion, by contrast, each participant asked questions and suggested ideas to further the group's thinking. The students did not give up the line of questioning until they had worked through all the possibilities and come up with a solution that was "reasonable" to them, as Angela said near the end of the discussion.

Sitting Together or Learning Together?

Teachers should not assume that just because students are sitting together in small groups, they are all engaged in high-level academic discourse or even being provided with equal opportunities to learn. If we expect meaningful participation and high-level thinking from each student in a small group, we must first plan group tasks carefully and teach discussion skills explicitly.

Research by Alvermann et al. (1996) supports this understanding: “Students say the tasks teachers present and the topics or subject matter they assign for reading influence participation in discussion” (p. 257). Yet creating an engaging task will not in itself guarantee that each student in a group will be invited to participate, nor will it ensure that students will push their thinking to a higher level. As is so often seen in small groups, middle level students just take turns going around the circle, with each member reading his/her notes or expressing an opinion, but no one actually *discussing* anything. Plus, when the group finishes the task or prompt set by the teacher, they think they are “done” with the discussion. Yet, as we’ve seen in the *Roll of Thunder* examples, the richest, deepest part of a discussion may come when the students are able to explore their own ideas. High-quality discussions must be modeled for students; they need to be able to actually *see* what sophisticated discussions look like.

Scaffolding Discussion Skills and Creating Accountability

Beth Maloch’s (2002) study in an eighth-grade classroom examined how a teacher can scaffold discussion skills for students. Maloch writes, “In essence, Ms. P [the classroom teacher] acted as a discourse guide—guiding students as they engaged in dialogue within literature discussion groups. She did this by making the discussion process more visible to the students” (p. 104). For example, the teacher modeled discussion skills for small groups, gave explicit cues to her students about how to use discussion strategies,

and also highlighted their benefits so they could better understand the purpose behind each one. She then sat with students during discussions and “caught” students using a new discussion skill well, giving immediate feedback. When she heard students having difficulties with a new or formerly taught discussion skill, she modeled the skill again in the small group setting and gave helpful hints to students. In this way, students understood that they were being held accountable for using these discussion skills, and they knew right away if they were applying new skills appropriately.

Scaffolding student discussion skills and slowly building on those skills over the course of a school year works very well, but only if there is accountability involved. As Cazden (2001) recounts in her book *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*, researcher Lauren Resnick from the University of Pittsburgh gave the name “accountable talk” to the kinds of talk a “community of learners” needs to use (p. 170). Resnick and her colleagues identified three expectations for discussion participants:

- *Accountability to knowledge:* Students make use of specific and accurate knowledge and provide evidence for claims and arguments.
- *Accountability to standards of reasoning:* Students use rational strategies to present arguments and draw conclusions, and challenge the quality of each other’s reasoning.
- *Accountability to the learning community:* Students are engaged in talk, listen attentively to one another, and ask each other questions aimed at clarifying or expanding ideas. (Cazden, 2001, p. 170)

These three expectations for discussion clearly require sophisticated discussion skills, higher-level thinking, and a good grasp of content knowledge—a combination that many college students would find challenging. Yet with the right combination of structure, modeling, and teacher feedback, even middle level students are capable of this level of academic discourse.

Expanding the Use of Talk Tickets

Building upon Maloch's idea that discussion processes need to be "visible" and that teachers need to gradually build discussion competencies in their students, I have expanded the role of discussion markers, or "talk tickets," in my classes. Talk tickets are made from colored index card stock. There are five colors in each envelope, and I give one envelope to each group.

Students first choose a color and sort through the pile to gather up all of their colored strips (about 30 per student). The first time I use talk tickets with my students early in the fall, the only direction I give is that every time they talk during the discussion, they need to put a ticket into the center of the table. I say nothing else and give them no explanation. Discussion begins, and I let it go for three minutes. At the end, I tell them not to move any of the talk tickets, but to just look at the pile in the center of the table. It never fails that in most groups, one or two people have a dozen or more of their colored tickets in the center, and at least one person has contributed only three or four (or fewer).

I ask the students what conclusions they can draw about their discussion just by looking at the final pile of talk tickets. At first, the students who talked the most want to compliment themselves for talking so much, but I ask them, "What are the qualities of a 'good' discussion?" and they get quiet very quickly—I can almost hear their thoughts as they realize the problem. The pile of colored tickets in the center of the table suddenly makes the lopsided conversation "visible" to the students. It soon becomes obvious that although they "knew" what a good discussion should look like when they brainstormed the list of criteria back in September, they are only now realizing how far they are from meeting their own standards in these discussions.

This unawareness of their own performance in discussions changes as we continue to use the talk tickets. Students look back at their talk ticket piles and realize that their discussions are *not* balanced, that no one is inviting other people to participate, and that people are interrupting each

other. We talk about how to improve on the discussion, and we try one more time while the concept is fresh, this time with a very easy question that can be answered without much preparation. Having to put the colored tickets in the center of the table is like putting giant brakes on the people who previously dominated the conversations. The tickets allow students to monitor their own and others' participation. But using these colored rectangular strips is just the beginning of how talk tickets can structure an "accountable" discussion for middle level students.

In order to scaffold group discussion skills, I use talk tickets in conjunction with explicit modeling of discussion strategies and frequent feedback during group discussions. For instance, as I teach the first discussion skill (equal participation), I model the skill for the class with a group of volunteers who read from a script; then I provide visual cues (the talk tickets) during discussions and walk around the room monitoring group conversations, providing feedback similar to the teacher described by Maloch. I also sit with one or two groups for an extended period of time (anywhere from three to ten minutes, depending on the task) to take observation notes.

Before I decide to move on to the next discussion skill with a class, I look for proficiency with the skill currently being practiced. Observation notes allow me to collect quick, concrete data regarding each student's proficiencies with previous and new discussion skills. My observation notes are set up as a simple table, with a coding system at the top, so that I can record a lot of information quickly. Table 1 shows an observation chart I use very early in the year, when we are inviting others to participate.

This chart shows how I keep track of both positive and negative discussion behaviors that have been modeled and discussed so far in class. For example, you'll notice that Joe has a lot to say and does most of the talking in the group, and that Sara rarely speaks unless invited, and that Jackie is the only one inviting Sara to share. With this chart, I can give concrete examples to Joe and Jackie of the skills they used well (invit-

Table 1. October group observation chart

Student Names	Codes:	
	D= Added a comment to discussion I = Invited someone to share Int = Interrupted someone MT = Moved task along	
Joe	D, D, D, D, MT, I (Jackie), D, D	Int (Sara) Int (Jackie)
Sara	D, D	
Jackie	D, I (Sara), D, D, I (Sara), MT, D	Int (Joe)

ing others to share) and the skills they need to work on (interrupting and dominating the conversation). Without this type of concrete documentation, I may not realize how little Sara is able to participate in her group's conversation, and therefore would not be able to help her, and her groupmates, develop the ability to create a more balanced conversation.

As the year progresses, I add new talk ticket shapes to the envelopes to help the students build their skills. The rectangles continue to represent that a student has offered an idea to the discussion, but now I add triangles to represent the more advanced skill of inviting someone else to share. As this skill is practiced, I give high compliments to students I see using them, especially students who were always the dominating chatterboxes of past discussions. Written onto the triangular-shaped tickets are several prompts to assist those students who have a hard time of thinking what to say. For example, two sentence starters on the triangular tickets are: "What is your opinion of _____?" and "Do you agree with _____ about _____?" The triangle tickets tie back to Resnick's idea of accountability to the learning community and help students create a far more equitable discussion.

Once students have demonstrated proficiency with these early discussion skills, I explicitly model more complex skills, such as how they can use specific, direct evidence from a text to support their ideas during discussion. After modeling

this skill for students a few times, I add another new talk ticket shape in their envelopes—a circle (see Photo 1). The circle tickets represent that someone in the group has asked another group member to defend his or her ideas with evidence, tying back to Resnick's ideas of accountability of knowledge and accountability to standards of reasoning. Again, the circle-shaped talk tickets have prompts written on them to assist all learners with using this unfamiliar skill. One such prompt asks, "[Group member's name], can you give evidence to support that idea?" Another sentence starter begins, "Can you tell me more about _____?" Armed with all three talk ticket shapes, the students become capable of balanced, rich discussions in which they challenge each other to support their ideas with evidence from texts. Using discussion markers creates a visual map of the group's verbal progress and of each member's personal contributions, allowing middle level students to monitor the flow of talk and achieve sophisticated academic conversations.

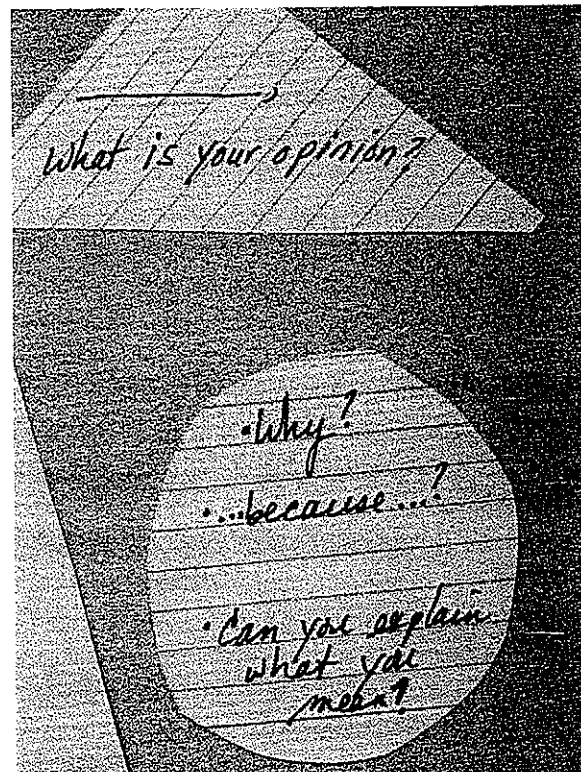


Photo 1. Talk tickets give structure to classroom discussion.

Table 2. April group observation chart

Student Names	Codes:	
	D= Added a comment to discussion I = Invited someone to share Int = Interrupted someone MT = Moved task along T = Kept track of time	TE = Used text evidence to support an idea Q = Asked a clarifying question P = Made a prediction PC = Personal connection to text NQ = Asked new question to develop discuss
Joleen	MT, I (Rose), D, Q, D, D, MT, I (Mark), D, D, T, PC	Int (Mark)
Mark	D, D, TE, P, D, D, I (Rose), MT, T, D	
Rose	D, Q, D, PC, D, TE	

Table 2 is a model of an observation chart I use near the end of the year, when my students have become proficient in many discussion skills. Although this chart uses many additional codes, I (like my students) have practiced all year, becoming very proficient at keeping up with a group's conversation and recording its members' discussion skills.

Take, for instance, excerpts from a discussion about Alexander the Great from one of my social studies classes. The original discussion prompt was, "Do you think Alexander the Great was a hero or a villain?" Using an observation chart like the one above, I was able to collect data showing that Gianna, Noah, and Christine each demonstrated proficiency with many of the discussion skills we had worked on all year. They pushed their discussion far beyond the task of talking about hero or villain when Gianna asked, "What if he [Alexander] hadn't died so young?" This question led the group to think critically about how the world might be a very different place today. Evidence that these students were using the newly taught skill came when Christine put down a circle and asked Gianna to choose a specific fact from her notes to support her ideas. Then Noah asked, "Why do you think he treated the people he conquered so well, Christine?" She looked thoughtfully at her resources before giving an answer, and then provided several possible reasons

for Alexander's behavior. The observation chart provided evidence to show that these students had a lot of content knowledge about an important figure in history, and they were so focused and engaged that they expanded their conversation into areas reflecting their natural curiosity.

By April, I take away the talk tickets and challenge my students to continue to use all of the discussion skills and strategies they have developed over the course of the year. After all, before my students have become truly sophisticated discussion participants, they must be able to participate in discussions *without* using the visible cues of the

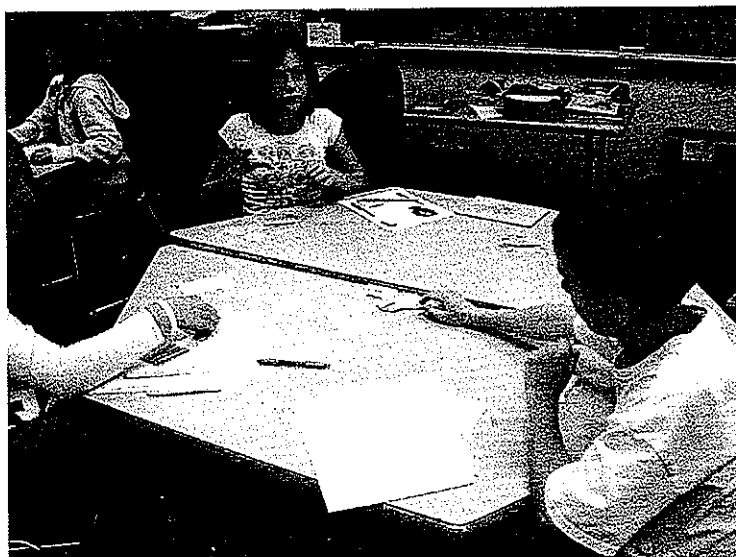


Photo 2. Noah marks his contribution with a talk ticket.

talk tickets. High-quality discourse becomes the expectation, and my students are held accountable through frequent observations and instant feedback. In just about every case, they rise to the challenge.

Conclusion: Quality Group Discussions Are Not Automatic

In an effort to cover the material assessed on annual tests, some teachers feel pressured to revert to traditional instructional methods in which they do all the talking and students sit passively accepting the information, hoping to spit it out again via rote memorization on the standardized tests. Yet according to Wittrock (1986), "learning from teaching is not automatic. It occurs primarily through active and effortful information processing by students" (p. 298). Discussion groups appear to be one instructional method re-

lated to the development of this type of "effortful information processing." Tsui (2002) echoes Mercer's conclusions when she writes, "This active learning approach might be facilitating critical thinking development by encouraging students to verbalize and try out ideas," and by allowing students to "reflect upon the views of one's peers, and to modify critically one's own views through incorporating feedback from others" (p. 750, 754).

However, middle level educators know that quality discussions are not automatic, either. Just because our students are sitting together does not mean that high-level learning is taking place. Talk tickets allow this kind of academic discourse to be structured, transparent, and easy to learn. More important, talk tickets provide a prop to support all learners, even those who generally have difficulty getting their voices heard—En-

SIDE TRIP: READWRITETHINK.ORG CONNECTIONS

In this article, the authors share how they got their students to participate in "rich, meaningful discussions" in class. Here are some additional resources from ReadWriteThink.org:

Literature Circles: Getting Started

Students practice different ways of collaborating to read a work of literature. They work in different roles as they compose and answer questions, discover new vocabulary, and examine literary elements. This lesson also includes checklists similar to what was described in the article.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/literature-circles-getting-started-19.html?tab=3#tabs>

Doodle Splash: Using Graphics to Discuss Literature

Students keep a doodle journal while reading short stories by a common author. In small groups, students then combine their doodles into a graphic representation of the text.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/doodle-splash-using-graphics-190.html>

Exchanging Ideas by Sharing Journals: Interactive Response in the Classroom

Pairs of students respond to literature alternately in shared journals. Minilessons are presented on responding to prompts, creating dialogue, adding drawings, and asking and answering questions.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exchanging-ideas-sharing-journals-1054.htm>

Using Student-Centered Comprehension Strategies with Elie Wiesel's *Night*

Working in small groups, students read and discuss Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* and then take turns assuming the "teacher" role, as the class works with four different comprehension strategies.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-student-centered-comprehension-884.html>

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

English language learners, struggling learners, even students with lower social or academic status than their peers. When teachers support students in a way that provides them with frequent opportunities to engage in structured conversations with peers during a school day, students learn more about the topic under study, the ground rules of discussion, and the sophisticated skills of academic discourse. In other words, well-supported discussions allow students to become more engaged in their learning, causing them to ask more questions, retain more content, and develop the natural curiosity educators wish to nurture in all learners.

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CALL for the Secondary Section High School Teacher of Excellence Award

Each NCTE affiliate is at liberty to select a person for this honor in the manner of its choice. An affiliate's governing board might acknowledge someone who has previously won an award within the affiliate, thus moving that person's recognition to a national level, or the affiliate might advertise for applications for nominations before choosing a winner. The nomination form is available at <http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/hste>.

Deadline: Documentation should be sent to the Secondary Section Steering Committee administrator/designee by **May 1, 2011**. Materials should be sent to the address on the current nomination form. A complete list of the 2010 High School Teachers of Excellence Award recipients is available at <http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/hste/currentrecipients>.
